

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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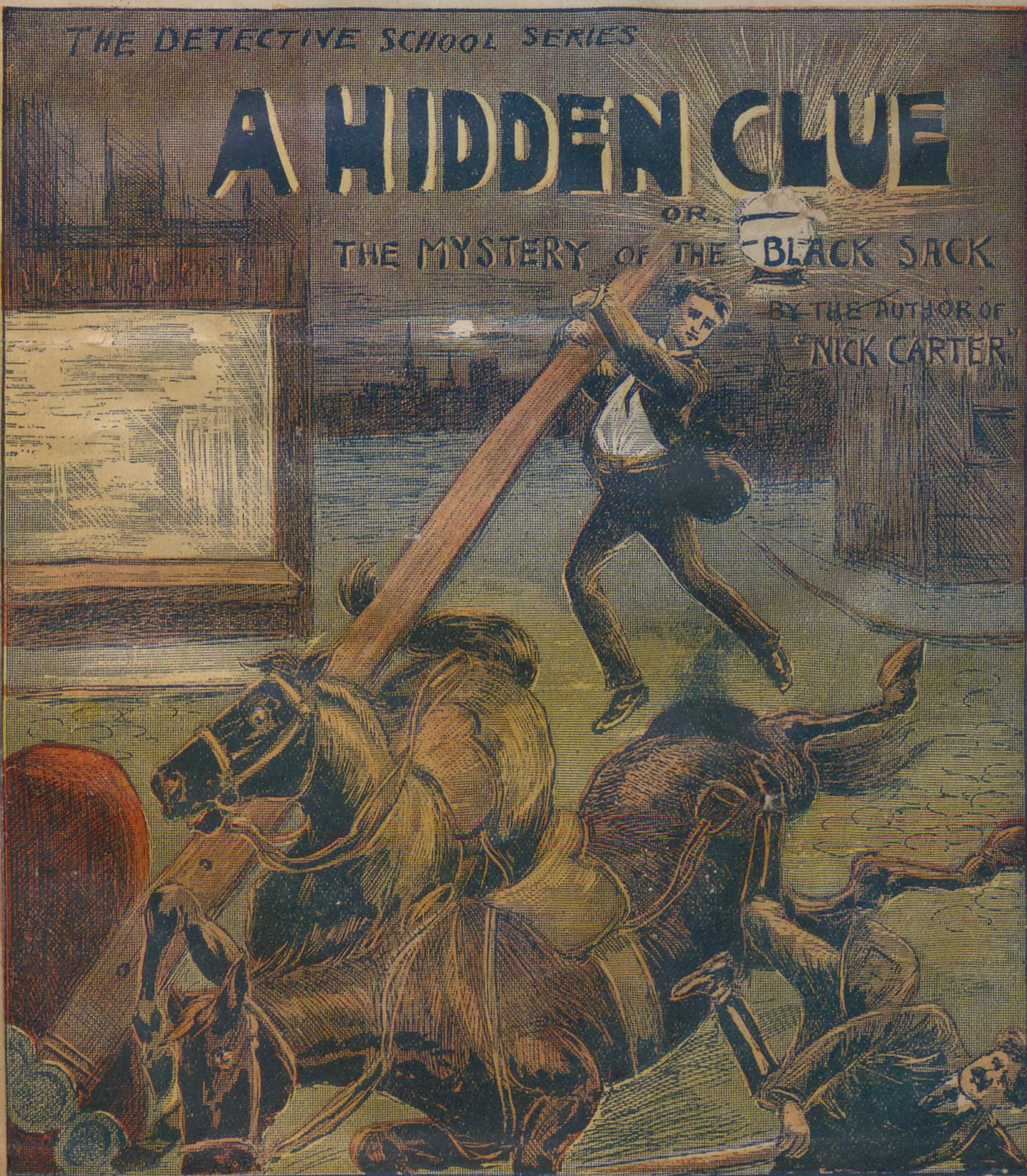
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THE DETECTIVE SCHOOL SERIES

A HIDDEN CLUE

OR,
THE MYSTERY OF THE BLACK SACK

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"NICK CARTER"



BOB GRABBED AT ONE OF THE ASCENDING WOODEN ARMS AS HORSES AND PURSUER REELED ACROSS THE RAILROAD TRACK A MIXED UP MASS,

NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

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A HIDDEN CLUE; OR,

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By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE BLACK SACK.

Crick-crack.

Plunge!

"What's this?"

"Grab him!"

"Stand back!"

Like pistol shots, sharp, rapid noises and words blended into a cyclonic sort of a jumble.

A ceiling had given way—that of a rickety room in a rickety house in the suburbs of Chicago.

A form lurking among the rafters above had come down, amid a trail of broken laths and pelting plaster—Bob Ferret, Nick Carter's apt pupil and bright particular juvenile detective star.

Two men had started up from a table where, heads together in whispered converse, they had bent over a small black sack.

Those two men, furtive, mysterious fellows, Bob Ferret had trailed from Chicago two hours previous, had shadowed here, although they were on horseback, had crept up into that attic, and had waited.

The two men were also waiting for somebody, for something. Both had finally arrived.

The "somebody" was a man enveloped in a long cloak, and face well concealed

by heavy false beard and pulled-down slouch hat.

The "something" now rested on the table—a small black sack. There had been a low-toned confab that Bob had not caught, but which, from sinister signs and expressive glances, he knew appertained to that mysterious sack, or rather its contents.

It was the starting-point in a new case—an affair where, that afternoon, Nick Carter had told Bob to follow a certain party.

Losing that party, Bob had done the next best thing in detective science—kept on the track of the only persons who had spoken to the man, and who had led him to this desolate, out-of-the-way place.

Bob felt that he had made no mistake in doing this, for the man who had brought the parcel in the black sack, he was certain, was, disguised, the man he lost track of a few hours previous.

It was in trying to get out of the attic and after this individual once more, in peering through a break in the ceiling and trying to guess what was in the sack, that Bob had slipped between the two rafters.

Then he plunged, coming down squarely on the table, splitting its lid off with a crash, landing on the floor with a slam,

and driving back the two startled men so that one of them went sheer heels over head in his chair, while the other never stopped till he bumped against the partition.

Bob was quick in thought, quick in action. He knew what to do, and he did it promptly.

The two men speedily recovered themselves. They made a dash toward him with those explosive ejaculations:

"What's this?"

"Grab him!"

Then they were halted, forced back once more, defeated in their purpose of seizing Bob, for, with a menace they dared not boldly face, Bob had shot out that ringing mandate.

"Stand back!"

It was enforced by a whirl that made their heads spin. When the section of ceiling tumbled, an old gas pipe bracket had fallen with it.

Threatening jabs, cuts, knocks, this, poised deftly above Bob's head, went swinging round and round, sawing the air with an ominous whistling sound, doing more to momentarily confuse and unnerve the two cowering fellows than half a dozen revolvers.

Window, door—Bob flashed a look at both. A vacant square gained through an old abandoned truck garden—his mind's eye took this in calculatingly.

Whiz-slam! Bob let his missile weapon drive. The men dodged and crouched. Bob made for the door in a bound.

"Confusion!"

"He's got it!"

The two men started up like suddenly aroused wildcats robbed of prey.

Bob had made a swoop with his nimble arm as he neared the door.

It was to grab up the mysterious sack, which had been knocked from the table when he descended, and had rolled some feet away from it.

There was something peculiarly sinister in that sharp "it!" which one of the men had pronounced—there was an uncanny feeling as to weight and rotundity of the object in the sack, and Bob's fingers tingled as he swung it up from the floor.

Then he was through the door in a flash, and then in a flash he decided on a

method of escape that had not occurred to him before.

The two horses which the men had ridden from the city stood browsing by the side of the house.

Bob's eye flashed as he formed a design. He made a straight run for the nearest steed.

Like an athlete he took a flying leap that landed him in the saddle; like a centaur he sat nerved to a time record dash if the horse could make it.

Through the negligé belt he wore Bob looped the slack of the black sack, with one hand grabbed up the bridle lines, with the other reached over and gave the second horse a sounding slap on the flank that started it up.

"Go!" voiced Bob into the quivering ears of the steed he was astride of.

"He's a good one!" came instantly following from Bob's surprised lips.

He observed one of the two men spring into view through the doorway.

At once the man saw what Bob had accomplished—saw one horse starting up like a thoroughbred, the other breaking into a frightened run.

Like an Indian runner, he hunched his form at a diving angle, making straight for a point the loose horse must soon cross.

Bob watched the man lift in the air. He must have been a rare expert in horsemanship, for he struck the saddle with both feet, and slid as gracefully down into it as if fitted there.

Bob knew a race was on. As an urchin he had gloried in riding all the circus trick mules that came along—when Nick Carter once took him on a long jaunt among the mountaineers of North Carolina, he had learned how to treat a horse right, which meant getting its best work out of it every time.

He whispered a coaxing word in the horse's ear, and he gripped the reins in a way that told the intelligent steed that it was about to be called on to do its best.

"Up!"

The horse shot forward like an arrow sent from a taut string, straight across the garden.

Bob took a backward glance. The man on the other horse was losing time turning it.

"If he don't shoot," muttered Bob, "I'll hit the road a hundred paces ahead of him. Pshaw!"

Just in time Bob kicked free from stirrups and saddle, just in time he gave his supple form a jerk that carried him into a heap of weeds.

With a frightened neigh the horse's hoofs struck some hollow sounding boards.

Then, fighting desperately to right itself, its front hoofs went beating and battering across bending, splitting timbers, through which its hind feet had already sank.

With a crash the top of some board-covered, abandoned well or cistern let in, and Bob knew that to delay was to waste time.

He cut across toward the road on foot, holding the dangling sack steady.

Crashing behind him came his pursuer. Bob dodged, the horse curvetted magnificently. Bob ducked too late!

A leather loop came shooting at him. The man on horseback must have had deft western training at some time in his experience, for he had made a sliding slip-knot at the end of a long hitching strap. It whirled out.

With a jerk Bob was landed so close in front of the prancing steed that the animal reared.

The horseman was thrown from the saddle. With a frightened snort the horse jumped forward, and Bob went flat.

For a second he fancied it his fate to be dragged to his death, or kicked to death by the flying hoofs of the maddened horse.

The strap was some eight feet long. Its other end was attached to the bit ring, held by a stout buckle.

As the horse took what was left of an old fence, the strap gave a jerk that brought Bob to his feet. On the other side he came, soles flat and firm on the smooth roadway.

"Whoa!"

As well call to the wind! Bob saw that on a quivering, flashing second of action depended his life itself.

He managed to jerk one hand free from the strap encircling his waist. Then his feet fairly flew.

For twenty yards, perhaps, he kept

side by side with the horse, timed his next move, risked all upon it; sprang at the horses' head, grabbed a line, clung to it; brushed and bounded by neck and breast of the animal, gave one dexterous swing, and circled aloft.

With a shock and a quiver Bob landed in the saddle. He fairly fell there, he dropped across the animal's neck to steady himself and grabbed the reins with fingers steeled by desperation and resolve.

He dared not look back, it might distort his delicate equilibrium—besides, he felt there was no need, he had certainly outdistanced immediate pursuit.

He did not try to check the mad, flying dash of the mettled horse—only one hand was free yet.

Bob lay along the arched quivering neck of the animal, sank his teeth across a thick strand of hair, dropped the reins, gropped at his waist, slipped the buckle of the strap, and sat up with a ringing, exultant cry of relief and satisfaction.

He felt it to be the hairbreadth exploit of his career in rapidity, in perils grouped within a space of sixty seconds.

"The city—Nick Carter," pronounced Bob, "and—the sack!"

Was it safe? Yes. It swung in and out at his belt.

"Wonder what is in it?" soliloquized Bob, one hand holding reins firmly, one hand sliding over the silky outside of the sack.

Round? almost! indented here, curving there—a queer something, but an important something, Bob knew that, for too great pains had been directed toward delivering it up under mysterious and careful circumstances to have it prove a trifle.

"Never!"

Bob shot out the word in a gasp that shook his whole frame.

His groping fingers suddenly left the sack's outlines as if it was red hot.

In the light of an uncanny conviction, a frightful certainty, he shrank and shivered till he nearly fell off the saddle of the speeding horse.

"Incredible—impossible!" cried the startled Bob Ferret, "but it's a head, a human head!"

CHAPTER II.

A QUEER CLUE.

Bob Ferret curdled.

The uncanny conviction that the black sack held a human head nearly took his breath away.

His detective experience, while brief, had been varied, but nothing so awesome as the present adventure had ever come within his professional grasp before.

"It is certainly a head in that black sack," declared Bob. "Ugh! It makes me crawl."

The situation was one decidedly "Frenchy"—it opened up all kinds of avenues of sinister, intricate, tragic thought, yet Bob was not captivated.

A mystery fascinated him—a case where grit, patience and intelligence were put to a severe test brought out his best abilities, but anything approximating the horrible had few charms for him.

"I don't like running into a thing like this," he told himself, "but, it's business. Nick Carter must take up the affair from this point on—it's too gruesome, too unnatural for me."

Bob rather shied away from his awe-inspiring burden after this. Then the shock of first discovery lessened in force, and he became intent on environment and purposes once more.

It was well that he did so, it was well that he took a backward glance.

"Hello!" ejaculated Bob, and the color came back to his cheek and he nerved up instantly.

The ceaseless, sharp echoing hoof taps of his own madly-rushing horse had drowned out those of a pursuer. That pursuer Bob now saw.

In some way the fellow unhorsed back in the garden, where Bob had been lassoed, had got the abandoned animal out of the pit it had fallen into.

Mounted upon it, bent nearly double as he urged it on with voice and hand stroke, he was shooting along on Bob's trail like a meteor.

Bob made sure that the black sack was safe from getting loose from his belt.

He unbuckled the hitching strap from the bit, doubled it, and prepared to give his pursuer the race of his life.

The steed that Bob rode was one that pauper and prince alike might covet.

At the touch of the strap, rapid as was its gait already, it seemed to acquire new wings of fleetness.

The houses of the suburb faded behind, the lights of the city flickered ahead—there and there only would Bob be safe, and he kept straight forward, even when diverging thoroughfares offered the seclusion of trees, bushes and cornfields.

Not a soul was passed for a mile. The second one occasional pedestrians were met with. They stared vaguely at the two flying horsemen.

The red signal lanterns of a railroad crossing finally showed, two squares ahead.

Beyond that a regular gas-lit street opened to view. Bob's horse was in a lather of foam, but as those steady, unfaltering hoof strokes to the rear sounded nearer and nearer, Bob urged his steed ahead without cessation.

"Up to me!"

Bob palpitated, and crouched forward a little. He could feel a sweep of hot breath could hear the panting of the pursuing horse.

Then, nose to nose, it shot up even with Bob's steed, and eye to eye, still sweeping ahead, Bob faced his pursuer.

"Give it up!" gasped the man. "I'll let you off, whoever you are, but give it up!"

"Guess you will!"

Bob veered his horse and struck the other a smart blow that made it shy.

"Stop! Take care! Look ahead!"

Look ahead, indeed! Bob thrilled magically, but he dared not stop. His pursuer was maneuvering to keep safely apace with him, yet get near enough to grab the black sack.

A bell was ringing at the station tower of the near railroad crossing.

The gates that guarded the tracks were down—a train went whirling by, a speeding flash of dust and smoke.

Bob saw his danger. He drew tight on the reins, but there was a sharp descent of the roadway here.

It had been sprinkled late in the afternoon, and across the smooth, slippery cedar blocks Bob's horse went sliding.

The other horse slipped also, then stumbled. Both going at a tremendous

rate of speed, it plunged forward and came up slap against the one Bob rode.

Quick-eyed Bob foresaw a catastrophe. His pursuer was already hurled half-way out of the saddle, both horses were going down.

As both feet of Bob's horse were knocked from under, the gates were reached.

They were just rising. Bob saw his opportunity. He lifted in the stirrups, kicked free, and grabbed at one of the ascending wooden arms as horses and pursuer reeled across the railroad tracks a hurtling, mixed-up mass.

The arm of the rail gate bent, but it was rod-girded. Holding firmly, Bob went up, perpendicular. Stationary aloft, the glare of the lantern hooked right at his side outlined him like a forlorn figure in a play under the red-slide calcium glow.

The black sack? safe—the man below? on his feet, staggering—the horses? snorting, plunging, trembling in every limb.

"Come down!"

The gleam of a weapon caught Bob's eye. He formulated a dodge, a slide.

"Throw it down!"

"No."

"Then—blocked! drat the luck!"

A switchman or flagman must have seen the ascent of Bob and the menace of the weapon.

An iron bar in his hand, he came running up to the spot, shouting loudly.

Three or four other men answered the summons. Bob slipped to the ground. Back the road he had come one horse was dashing free, the other with its baffled rider was also speeding.

Bob faced the curious group of railroad men with a smile.

"Only a tough man who was bound to rob me," he vouchsafed in explanation.

"We'll watch that he don't come back," spoke a sturdy voice. "Street car across the tracks—put, if you're nervous, youngster."

Bob availed himself of the offer promptly. Then the quick whizzing of the electric wheel, as the car started up, lulled all further fears to sleep.

He handled his gruesome bundle very gingerly, as half an hour later he entered

the rotunda of the Palmer House where Nick Carter was stopping.

No wonder that Bob was excited and fluttering as he ascended to the suite occupied by the great New York detective.

He had come back from a six hours' shadow with results likely to open up the mysteries of a most startling case.

He knocked at a door, and entered without further ceremony the sitting-room of the suite.

Nick Carter was not in view. Jack Burton, another of his young pupils, was, however, and Bob questioned him eagerly.

"Where is Mr. Carter, Jack?"

"Gone on some business, Bob," came the reply.

"For long?"

"He was afraid so."

"What do you call 'long'?"

"He said he might be away till to-morrow night."

Bob dropped the black sack to the floor at his side as he sank to a chair disappointedly.

Jack knew from the face and manner of his colleague that Bob was worried.

"Bothered, Bob?" he insinuated.

"I should say so!"

"On the new case?"

"Yes. Look here, Jack; I've got to talk it out, and you're one of us. Mr. Carter being away is like having the cartridge to a pistol missing when you want to shoot. Still, something has got to be done, and at once. I'm afraid it's a vital necessity."

"If I can help you, Bob——"

"Hardly."

"I'm a good listener."

"Well, here's the case in a nutshell. A man claiming to be Richard Jeffrey, a retired capitalist, came to consult Nick Carter to-day."

"Yes, I saw him," nodded Jack.

"He said that a young man named Foster had written him threatening letters, had sworn he would take his life, had even tried it once or twice, because they were both suitors for the hand of the same young lady."

"I heard about that."

"He acted so queer, Nick Carter got suspicious. He didn't seem to want this Foster watched, he didn't want to hire

some one to guard himself from harm. He simply seemed to be dreadfully anxious to impress upon Nick Carter the fact that he would be found murdered some time. If he was, in the interests of justice he wished Nick to remember his warning, and arrest young Foster.

"As soon as Jeffrey left here, Mr. Carter sent me direct to shadow him. He told me there was something queer about the affair, and he wanted me to find out what."

"I followed Jeffrey. This afternoon he met two fellows in a park. They had a great confab. When they separated, somehow in a rush of bicycle racers, Jeffrey gave me the slip. I did the next best thing to following him."

"Put after the others?"

"Yes."

"And ran them down?"

"To a lonely house in a near suburb. There, an hour ago, a man came with a black sack. He was disguised, but I am positive it was Jeffrey. I accidentally fell through a ceiling. I grabbed up that black sack. Through quite a round of adventures I've got it here safely."

"Is that it?" questioned Jack, interestedly glancing at the object on the floor by the side of Bob's chair.

"Yes."

"What's in it?"

"That's the trouble," said Bob, an anxious look coming into his eyes. "I can handle cases of counterfeiting, swindling, ordinary crimes, but when it comes to murder——"

"Eh!" projected Jack, with a jump.

"Yes, this is a murder case."

"How do you know?"

"That black sack contains a head."

"What!"

"A human head."

"The dickens!"

Bob lifted the sack to place it on the table—to try and get braced up for the unwilling task of examining it more closely. Somehow, his keen adventures of the night and the presence of his peculiarly gruesome acquisition unnerved him.

The sack slipped from his unsteady fingers. It came open.

Out rolled the head.

Bob shrank and Jack shivered.

Then Bob stared and Jack goggled.

"Why——" began the latter.

"The deuce!" muttered Bob Ferret, astounded, startled, disbelieving and crestfallen all at once—"it's India rubber!"

CHAPTER III.

A "PIPING HOT" CASE.

The head was India rubber—one glance showed that, clearly, unmistakably.

As it rolled to a dark corner, Bob could make out all the outlines of a face, clear-cut, but undistinguishable until it came to a stop and was brought up to the light.

He looked and he felt a trifle chagrined. Jack Burton seemed wrestling with an inclination to laugh outright.

"Funny!" he commented.

"It means something, all the same!" flared Bob, always nettled where ridicule threatened. "Tell me a man would stealthily carry that head way out into the country, its new possessors fight like frantic fanatics for its recovery, for mere sport!"

"Does it resemble any one?"

"It must. We'll find out——"

Tap-tap.

About to seize and more closely examine the rubber head, Bob instead hastened to the door at the quick sound of a rap.

"It may be Mr. Carter," he began—"who? what! help!"

The minute Bob opened the door a man rushed at him. He vaguely thought of his pursuer of the night, as he caught a darkling gleam of intensely savage eyes.

Nothing further of an inspection was vouchsafed Bob, however.

The man shot out a hand—smash—snap—and Bob, blinded, choked, convulsed, went whirling around the apartment tearing at his throat for breath and utterance.

The newcomer, the instant Bob showed his face, had thrown an ingeniously devised sort of a bag over his head that snapped close about the neck.

Bob could not release it. Staggering, choking, he saw stars, and felt his head spin with dizziness.

Then some one released the metal catches of the bag. Bob panted once or twice, and looked questioningly at his rescuer—Jack.

The latter was nursing a swollen jaw, and looked somewhat dazed.

"The man?" projected Bob.

"Knocked me galley-west, and disappeared like a shadow."

"The head?"

The rubber head was gone—black sack and all.

Bob ran out into the hotel corridor, down the stairs, stoppped several persons with rapid inquiries, got no satisfaction, returned to the detective's room realizing that he had lost time tracing the despoiler's escape by means of the grand staircase, when he had probably fled down some one of the numerous private street stairways.

"What do you say now?" he demanded of Jack.

"About what?"

"That head. It must be a bold man, and a direful necessity that nerves him up to make an onslaught like that, direct on Nick Carter's headquarters."

"Bob, it does seem important," admitted Jack.

"Now, what does this all mean?"

Bob got his rattled wits and his disordered attire back into some kind of coherent shape.

Then he sat down to ponder and calculate and plan, and Jack, knowing his moods, did not disturb him.

"I can't let this thing grow cold," observed Bob, finally. "By the time I can consult Nick Carter, every clue to these fellows and their mysterious head would be covered up."

"Don't see what you can do," said Jack.

"I can go up to the house where this Jeffrey lives and make a new start from there, if nothing better," declared Bob.

"Oh, say! hold on. Your rubber head, and the swelled head that rough fellow gave me made me forget," interrupted Jack, as Bob started for the door.

"Forget what?"

"Mr. Carter left a letter."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"You didn't give me a chance to get to it. He said it was about this Jeffrey case."

"Ah!"

"Instructions, I suppose."

"Glorious old Nick Carter!" cried

Bob, quite delightedly. "I thought he wouldn't go away indefinitely and leave me to wade around in all kinds of complications, without some saving clause in reach."

Bob eagerly took a letter that Jack tendered him.

"Robert Ferret, Esq."—that was quite consequential!

He rather liked Nick's way of making a fellow have a good opinion of himself when he deserved it, and confidently counted on finding in the missive some instructions that would clear up some of the uncertainty of the Jeffrey case.

"Pshaw!"

Bob's face fell as he tore off the inclosing envelope.

Inside was a second envelope, closely secured.

In a bold hand across its centre was the direction:

"Sealed Orders."

In one corner, in smaller handwriting, were these words:

"To be opened only if Richard Jeffrey attempts to leave the United States."

Bob was never so disappointed in his life.

More than that, the vagueness of the inscription aroused the most vivid curiosity, excitement and surprise.

"No definite instructions as to the present, no hint as to what I am to do, how to proceed, the motives of those I am to watch. Here's a riddle on my hands and no mistake!"

Bob pocketed the letter with a woefully dissatisfied sigh. Then he brightened up at the suggestion of an invariable broad principle in detective science.

"Nick Carter never makes a bad break or a false move," he reflected. "He knows what he is doing when he gives me those 'sealed orders.' I'll strike out an independent course till I see him to-morrow night."

Bob had decided to proceed to the residence of the mysterious Richard Jeffrey, the man who was so afraid he was going to be murdered, yet who carried inexplicable rubber heads to lonely, out-of-the-way places, to desperate fellows with faces like assassins and methods like brigands.

He took a car on State street, and as it

was pretty full crowded up into a corner of the rear platform.

Bob was very thoughtful. He was sure to find out something about this Richard Jeffrey by visiting the vicinity of his residence, but all this superficial investigation took him far afield from that fascinating element of the case—the rubber head.

As an artificial head it had far more attractiveness for Bob than when he had supposed it to be a real head.

Carrying around a real head to hide, to destroy, was a thing that might reasonably happen, but what in the world was Richard Jeffrey doing with a rubber one, and what vital value attached to it that his evident accomplices in some secret scheme risked arrest, committed burglary to recover it?

"That fellow who chased me on the horse is a quick one and a clever one," reflected Bob. "He must have got around those railroad tracks and on my trail almost at once after I crossed them. Here! what you doing? Don't crowd!"

A man had squeezed so close up to Bob that he had very nearly trodden on his toes.

He was a big fellow, with his back to Bob, his coat collar drawn well up around his face, and as no one was coming in or out of the car, Bob saw no excuse for his actions.

The man growled out something that might be taken for an apology, and edged away a trifle.

Then Bob saw his hand go up in a queer way, and, always watchful of any peculiar action, whether it concerned himself or not, saw that he had made a motion of recognition or some more sinister importance to the driver of a cab directly behind the car.

Before Bob could resume his reflections, the big man squeezed close against him again, pretended to steady himself by clutching at the wire gate, guarding passengers from falling on the next tracks, and Bob heard something click.

Too late to save himself, he saw that the man's demonstrations were intentionally hostile and directed against himself.

He had slipped the locking catch of

the wire gate. It gave, carried Bob off his balance, and jangled across the next tracks, Bob right on top of it.

So timed was the tumble that gate and Bob were deposited directly in front of a car coming at full speed.

Bob saw its headlight glare directly on him. He scrambled, but a loose piece of wire caught his coat.

Bang! the fender came crashing.

Bob felt himself lifted as the wire gate was forced up.

The movement tore his coat loose. Not a moment too soon he sprang clear of the track, for the next instant the gate was pounced on by the wheels that had at first tilted it and was ground back under fenders and wheels.

Bob's head struck a cobblestone. For a second he was half-stunned.

He was conscious that some one supported him, forced him away from a crowd of white, curious faces.

Slam!

"Hold on!" shouted Bob.

He was in a carriage, the carriage that had followed the street car.

The man who had jostled him on the platform sat beside him—Bob could tell him from the overcoat.

He was just slamming up the carriage windows as the vehicle started up smartly, with the words:

"Boy's a friend of mine—I'll see him safely home."

"Stop!"

Bob started up. The man pressed him back. Then he got a grip like iron on Bob's wrist.

"No use," he advised effectually checking Bob's efforts to reach the door and spring out.

"See here!" flared Bob. "Who are you? Oh! I know, I see."

Bob did know and Bob did see—eyes and mind opened wider than they had yet done since three o'clock in the afternoon of that eventful day.

His companion or captor, as the case might be, was the man whom Nick Carter had ordered him to follow, who had delivered the black sack to the two fellows at the suburban house, who had tried to push him under the wheels of the cable car.

Recognizing him as one and the same

and all of these individuals, Bob involuntarily murmured his name:

"Mr. Richard Jeffrey!"

CHAPTER IV.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

Bob realized instantly the fix he was in.

The man who had recovered the black sack had instantly sought out his employer, and that individual, on guard near the Palmer House, had followed Bob when he left it, prepared to drive him off the trail.

Bob had need to look only once at Jeffrey's face to trace in its hard lines the most uncompromising determination.

For some purpose not yet demonstrated Jeffrey had come to Nick Carter, not anticipating that his own actions would be scanned.

Bob's appropriation of the black sack had warned Jeffrey that he was dealing with people not easy to delude.

Now he had Bob in his power, and Bob guessed that it was to no pleasant boulevard drive he was being taken.

"You did that pretty cleverly," said Bob.

"Did what?" scowled the man by his side.

"Tried to kill me—cared so kindly for my mangled remains! What's your game, anyway."

"Boy!" hissed Jeffrey, "you know too much!"

"Nick Carter knows more, perhaps."

Jeffrey started as if stung. Then his face got back to its old harshness.

"Nick Carter is out of the way for twenty-four hours—I've learned that," he muttered.

"About that rubber head——" began Bob, and paused.

From the drivers seat came a whistle, and all of a sudden the vehicle stopped.

It did so with a slam of doors. Bob sat breathless. The transition to intense darkness fairly startled him.

Jeffrey had let go of his wrist. Bob heard him moving away. Then he seemed to get out of the carriage, for the wrenched open door slammed violently to again.

Bob about to scramble for that same door, paused as a light illuminated the scene.

Horses and carriage were in a large stone-paved room. Part of a house, a building, a cellar or a stable, it was the queerest compartment he had ever seen.

The driver still sat on his seat. Jeffrey had lowered one of the carriage sashes. Standing just outside of it, he fixed a full look on Bob.

"There's no such thing as getting you to take a thousand dollars, going up to the pineries for a month or two, and forgetting your detective duties, I suppose?" he queried sharply.

"I should say not."

"Go ahead."

Jeffrey spoke to the driver. The latter apparently uttered some demur which Bob did not catch.

"It's the only way—do we stand aside for so small a thing as a boy!" fiercely demanded Jeffrey.

"What's coming?"

Bob read murder in Richard Jeffrey's cruel face. He was suspensefully impressed with the nameless menace accompanying his words and actions.

A snap and a jar enlightened Bob. Operated by some mechanism from under the driver's seat, the floor of the carriage fell out, and was jerked one side.

Through the emptiness thus afforded Bob slid.

His hands struck the coping of a round iron hole, directly above which the vehicle had been halted.

Lower he went, to grip and grab, to halt at a mere finger clutch, with his arms nearly jerked from their sockets.

"The monsters!"

Bob heard an iron cover clanged back into place, the wheels of the carriage moving, and then one last ominous heart-chilling sound—the rush of the noisy, noxious waters of some deep sewer beneath him.

The summary movements of this Richard Jeffrey appalled him. Why, the man was a fiend! He did not wait to argue—he simply swept obstacles from his path as he would brush aside a fly.

Bob reached up one hand. It touched the bottom of the iron cover to the shaft. He had stayed his descent by most fortunately catching at some underpinning side braces that sustained the cover.

He worked his shoulders up, he got a

good pressure leverage and gave a vigorous push.

The cover was shifted. Bob crawled out on the stone floor of the place. He replaced the cover. Then he sat down to let his strained nerves relax from the terrible tension of the previous few moments.

Bob saw a chink of light and pressed up close against the broad doors that guarded the street entrance to this place—evidently the washing room of some great company stables.

He fingered around for a knob or catch. He located a fastening at last, a hasp and staple.

Just about to start the door sliding, a voice outside halted him.

"Ten twenty-seven, you say, next building."

"That's it. Building locked up for the night, but you'll find the janitor at the door. He's fixed. Our friend is waiting for you in the empty room."

"All right—you know the programme?"

"Like a book! We won't drop a stitch, on our part."

Bob waited. He knew that it was Jeffrey and the driver of the carriage that had brought him hither who were conversing.

He heard wheels move away, and then footsteps down the stone pavement; gave the door a little slide, stuck out one eye, and saw that he was at the court back of a block facing on Dearborn street.

At the rear of the next building stood Jeffrey. He had just shaken its locked door. Some one came. There was a parley, Jeffrey disappeared. There was the sound of a door locking, and Bob stepped out from covert.

It seemed good to breathe the open air again, to realize that he had escaped death in a hideous form, that the instigator of the attempt was in room ten twenty-seven of the building opposite to which Bob took up an immediate position.

One—two—up to ten Bob counted the stories of windows. One light showed only in the great sky-scraper.

"Tenth floor," murmured Bob. "Am I daunted? Not till I strike the next snag. Mr. Richard Jeffrey, you've shown

your colors—I've a personal interest in running you down now."

Bob scanned the narrow court. A few people only were visible at its far end.

He crossed the street and made a leap. It was to catch at the extending end of the water pipe that formed one edge of the fire escape.

Bob went up the ladder like a native born sailor, once started. He got up to story ten and halted there.

"Four windows to the left," he murmured in dismay. "I'm blocked."

He tried the window looking upon the fire escape. It was locked on the inside and an office door locked beyond it.

The appearance of a stray police officer below warned Bob to get out of sight. It was one more story to the roof. He reached it and reflected seriously what was best next to do.

Bob's eyes snapped calculatingly as he approached the rear edge of the building and looked down.

There was that lighted window twenty feet below, and here at hand, running over a slanting plank, was a rope with a large iron bucket at its end.

Bob saw that the gravel roof was undergoing repairs, and rope and bucket, employed to hoist supplies, had been drawn up here for safe storage until the next day.

He loosened the rope where it was wound around a flag staff.

He paid it out slowly. He let the bucket get just below the edge of a line even with the windows of story ten.

It swung about two feet from the window where the light was.

"Dare I venture?" cogitated Bob. "It seems the only way to get a peep into that room."

Bob made fast and secure the rope around the flagstaff.

Then slowly and cautiously he began to descend it toward the bucket.

"Why! it's snug as a sailor's hammock," he commented, nestling down into the bucket.

Bob put out a hand and caught at an awning hook at the side of the nearest window.

Gently pulling forward, he took a peep through the lower pane.

The room was devoid of furniture,

having evidently been chosen as a safe rendezvous because it was untenanted like the building at night, save for the janitor, who was friendly to the plotters.

Two men were in the apartment, and both of them Bob instantly recognized. Jeffrey, the man who had just tried to kill him, and the fellow who had stolen the rubber head from Nick Carter's suite of rooms at the Palmer House.

There was a marble-topped steam register in the middle of the room. Upon this rested an outfit that the engrossed Bob at once tried to fit together like pieces of a Chinese puzzle.

There was the rubber head—once more in the black sack.

Beside it lay a knife, or rather stiletto, with a fancy carved handle.

Next came a hat, shoes, coat, vest—in fact, a complete suit of clothing.

Bob stared, and wondered, and theorized. Then, knowing that a single overheard word might furnish the key to the entire situation, he held close, not only to the awning hook, but to the window sill as well, and fairly glued his ear to the pane.

"The mine is ready to fire!"

This Bob heard vaguely in the tones of Richard Jeffrey.

"Yes, by to-morrow night—ha! Look!"

Bob's eye whipped into vigilance at the sharp outcry.

"Oh, confound it!" he ejaculated in dismay.

He had been seen. The bobbing gravel pail had attracted the attention of the two men in the room, and they had rushed toward the window.

If Bob had not just then shown his face in the full glare of the light, he might have feigned to be a workman about some night duties with the roofing.

Up went the window with a jar. Out protruded two startled faces.

"The boy who stole the rubber head!" cried the man nearest.

"Has he the lives of a cat! I just dropped him——"

"No, that's the trouble—you didn't drop him!"

"Then I will now!"

Bob was for instantly skimming up the

rope. Jeffrey, quick as lightning in resources, prevented him.

He ran back into the room. Back he came with his cane.

Reaching it over, he swept its crooked end across the rope four feet above the iron bracket.

Dragging it toward the window so that the bucket tilted dangerously, he spoke rapidly to his companion.

"Hold it."

"Good! What are you up to?"

The speaker held to the rope and looked back into the room to watch Jeffrey's movements.

The latter whipped out a great horn-handled knife and opened a razor-edged blade.

He fairly sprang back to the window, leaned past his comrade, and gave half a dozen vicious cuts at the strained cable.

Snip-snap-creak!—the rope parted.

Boom!

Way down below, with a sickening shock, dull and distant though it was, the bucket landed on the hard stone pavement.

"Say, he hasn't!" ejaculated Jeffrey's companion.

"Hasn't what?"

"Spilled!"

The two heartless plotters had followed the course of the descending bucket with a rapt, eager gaze.

Jeffrey's eyes had been fixed only upon the rope. When he cut it he supposed the boy to be shrinking into its capacious depths, appalled at his certain fate.

Now as the murderous twain looked down, they saw a battered, rattling bucket strike the pavement and rebound to the cobble stones of the street, but no form spilled out.

"See here——" began Jeffrey, and looked up.

He was just in time to see the dangling rope quiver as a form left it.

"Too nimble for them that time!" uttered the breathless Bob, "but—ugh! I just slipped it!"

The next minute his lips set grimly.

"They've seen me!"

Yes, and were after him. At the window was stationed Jeffrey's companion, and at a trap door letting out on the roof there came a clatter a minute later.

A shot would end Bob—he was sure of this if he paid out the rope and tried to descend it.

On the other hand, what did remaining on the roof promise?

The surrounding buildings were higher than the one where he was.

"It's dark enough up here," he muttered, "and the gravel, tar pails, sheathing, lumber are no good to hide behind, but—I'll do just that!"

"Just that" was quite an inspiration. Bob ran to the flagstaff. He caught its two dangling pulley ropes and went up fast as an expert steeple climber.

The trap swung open. Then, always cautious it seemed, Richard Jeffrey began to peer around.

He had a revolver in his hand—he poked behind this object on the roof with his foot, and peered under that.

"Why, he isn't here!" Bob relievedly heard him ejaculate.

Jeffrey went to the edge of the roof and looked down at the rope dangling there.

Bob hugged close to his aerial perch.

He felicitated himself that Jeffrey would decide he had in some deft way escaped from the roof—he was sure of it, as Jeffrey moved back toward the trap.

At that moment a strange, a thrilling thing occurred.

Half a mile to the east was the signal service tower on top of the great Auditorium building.

From its apex, which cleaves the sky like a giant obelisk, there suddenly shot out a piercing glare.

"Oh, my," fluttered Bob.

He knew what was due—storm signals had been telegraphed from Washington, and the Chicago operator was about to flash intelligence of the same thirty miles out on the lake, as far to distant suburbs.

South swept the magnificent focus of the giant searchlight.

West it veered—up, down, up—the three understood manipulations were waved afar.

A momentary rest—poor Bob!

Squarely upon him, for the space of a full minute, a forlorn figure clinging to that flagstaff above the city's roar and din, the focused rays fell with the brilliancy of a lime-light ten feet distant.

"Aha!"

That word was his doom. Bob felt it as it broke from Jeffrey's startled lips.

"Come down!" he called up sharply.

"No."

"Once!"

No reply.

"Twice!"

Bob's lips set firm. He would die game!

"Three times!"

Bang!

CHAPTER V.

AGAINST FEARFUL ODDS.

"It's murder!"

"Why, he's good as dead."

"You say so?"

"I know so. See here, mate—orders is orders. We're paid for a system."

"By Jeffrey?"

"Exactly."

"It was the girl first. We've got the girl. Next, two nights ago they bring a boy. His wound is nothing, a mere scratch, but they've doped him till he's nigh gone. I came in to shake him an hour ago; dumb as a nutshell."

"Here's the bag."

"Weighted?"

"Of course."

Bob Ferret, experiencing the first conscious moment he had known for seventy-two hours, lay like some person in a horrible trance.

He could not move or speak, or even see with clearness.

He was lifted. He felt himself stowed into what seemed to be a puffy, sagging receptacle of some time. It appeared to be laced up. Then he lay still and rigid.

Where was he? He soon knew from the conversation of the two men that they were sailors aboard some vessel just off Chicago.

He soon surmised, further, that when the searchlight glow had revealed him so startingly to Jeffrey on the flagstaff on the roof, the latter had brought him down with a single shot, just as that base-hearted monster would wing a bird.

Bob felt quite a pain in the side of his head, and guessed that the bullet must have stunned him, if nothing worse.

He had probably been sent here by Jeffrey, to some more of his numerous ad-

herents, had been doped, and now the order had gone out to "settle him."

How? What was the bag he was in? Bob felt as if his limbs were chained, his tongue crisped and dried to a cinder.

But he could think, vividly—painfully clear, but, oh! this dread paralysis of his faculties that made of menacing death a torture undefinable!

Suddenly Bob was lifted—he guessed out of some cabin in a ship to its deck. Then he was laid flat again, and heavy leaden weights clamped on the deck boards.

Somewhere there was an orifice in the covering that incased him, for cool fresh air seemed to sweep into his lungs in a reviving rush.

He felt his senses wake up. He stretched out both hands. He moved his tongue.

"Stop!" was what he fancied he shouted out, but if the sailors who had now lifted him again and were swinging him with a one, two, three movement noticed the utterance, it was only as a half-articulate murmur.

"Let him go!"

"Go it is!"

Splash!

Bob dizzied as he was swung through the air, and chilled as the shock of striking the water followed quickly.

In surging volume this came upon him; but if the fresh air had revived, the cold, stimulating water electrified him.

He knew he was being dragged down by heavy weights, he realized that the quickest of moves only could succor him.

Into his pocket Bob's hand groped. His knife!—he had it.

He could not trust his trembling fingers, but opened it with his teeth.

Bob made a feeble sweep at his covering. It gave, and, encouraged, he executed a sturdier lunge.

It slipped from him like a sliding coat of mail—he was free. He came up to the surface of the water.

His head just grazed the keel of some large vessel. Bob was too weak to swim, but he drew himself a few feet along the rough, tarred seams, and made a desperate grab for an object just astern—the yawl of the ship.

Intense darkness brooded. He trusted

to that to aid him. Fairly falling into the bottom of the boat, Bob reached out hand and knife.

A rope parted—the yawl fell free, and drifted away slowly landward.

Bob lay inert for over an hour. A shock roused him, and he managed to sit up.

"It's the government pier," he murmured. "Hello! hey—hello!"

Thin and piping as his tones were, they attracted the attention of one of the fishermen who practically lived on the pier.

He hooked the boat close, spliced the cut rope, secured it, and came down into the boat.

"Why, what's this?" he stared, noting Bob's frightful condition.

"Wounded, drugged, starved, I guess," murmured Bob.

The fisherman lifted him in his great arms and carried him to where his rude lumber shanty stood.

Fire to warm, food to revive, a coarse but soft couch to rest on—Bob felt as if he was in paradise by contrast. Then he drifted into dreamland.

He was surprised when he woke up to find how proper treatment had spurred up his disordered faculties.

He was astonished as well to learn that it was three o'clock in the afternoon of the next day.

Another grand meal, primitive but appetizing, a draught of some subtle medicine the rugged fisherman had in stock, and Bob began to believe he was going to be his own bright, animated self very shortly.

The wound in his head was, indeed, a mere scratch. As the deadly effects of the powerful drug administered him by Jeffrey passed away, the real cause of his recent weakness disappeared.

Bob went through his pockets. His watch and the money he carried in outside receptacles were gone, but a secret pocket inside his shirt still held its treasured store—a reserve fund he always carried for contingencies, and the "sealed orders" letter from Nick Carter.

"There will be action soon on that, if I'm not mistaken," soliloquized Bob. "That scoundrel, Richard Jeffrey, is getting ready for some tremendous move.

Seventy-two hours off the trail! Has it been sufficient to give him leisure to mature his plans?

Bob made the fisherman a liberal money gift.

The latter insisted on rowing him over the breakwater stretch of lake. Bob got on real terra-firma feeling so queer that, crossing the lake park, he sat down on a bench to rest and get his "land legs" in working order once more.

A newsboy ran by just at that moment.

"Paper, mister?" he bawled. "Full account of the great Jeffrey murder!"

"Eh? What!" started Bob. "Here, let me have one."

He glanced at the first column of the newspaper with its glaring headlines.

Bob's face fell as he did so, his eyes expressed the shock and wonderment of a sudden and overwhelming surprise.

Time to scan those sealed orders now of a surety!

For Richard Jeffrey had "left for another land," of a verity!

CHAPTER VI.

NOT THE MAN!

"There's your dollar."

"And there's your face."

"Bob Ferret looked into a mirror.

"My own mother wouldn't know me," he murmured, and turning left the Olympia Theatre by its stage exit.

What Bob had just done was to hire a theatrical artist to disguise that handsome, ingenuous face of his so that it would give him an entirely new appearance and stand the test of time.

Bob walked briskly from the theatre till he came to a quiet restaurant, ordered a meal, and sat down at a far corner table—not to eat, however, but to think.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, and it seemed to him as if in the six hours just passed he had lived as many days.

The scanning of the newspaper he had purchased on the lake front had been the beginning of revelations and disclosures that had come with stunning force.

Two nights previous, according to the paper, Richard Jeffrey, a respectable capitalist, had been stabbed to death at Lake Geneva, a few miles from Chicago, and his body thrown into the water.

A visitor to that summer resort had

discovered it. Near by was a knife bearing the initials "W. F."

Some friends of the dead Jeffrey had come forward, identified the body, identified the knife as belonging to Walter Foster.

The latter, they swore, was a rival of Jeffrey's in the affections of a certain young lady, Miss Clara Dean, and he had often threatened to remove Jeffrey from his path.

A country coroner's jury passed on the case. They found that Richard Jeffrey had been done to death by Foster, and his body had been taken charge of by his friends.

It now lay at his residence, whence in the morning it was to be shipped to the family vault in another State.

Walter Foster was in jail, accused of murder, and, according to popular prejudice, guilty of it.

The young lady had fled from her home, undoubtedly anxious to evade being mixed up in so terrible a scandal.

This was what Bob had read. It announced the end of the case he was working on.

Death had overtaken Richard Jeffrey in the midst of his schemes, the expected outcome of which would now never come to light.

Bob had proceeded to the Palmer House at once. To his disappointment, he found both Nick and Jack absent, and the clerk told Bob that they had left word they might be away out of the city for two days.

Then Bob came out grand, as he always did when forced back on his own resources.

Every minute, his frame growing stronger, his mind clearer, he began to change his opinion about the Jeffrey case being a dead issue.

Some big scheme had been nipped in the bud by the sudden death of Jeffrey—what?

"I'm going to find out," declared Bob, and he said it in a way that showed he was on his mettle.

He knew by sight the two men who had manipulated the rubber head, the driver of the trap carriage—he would set at work to hunt down these men.

He had heard the two sailors who had

thrown him overboard talk about "having the girl safe." Could this be the missing Miss Clara Dean?

Further, Bob somehow did not believe Walter Foster guilty of Richard Jeffrey's murder. The knife that did the deed, according to the papers, marvelously resembled the one Bob had seen in the room which he had looked into from the roofer's bucket the night Jeffrey downed him temporarily.

"I'll take a look for all of these people," planned Bob, "but first of all I'll go up and see the lay of the land around Richard Jeffrey's residence. Some of his crowd—and he had a big one, land and water, waiting on his beck and nod—may be hanging around there."

Bob felt that he would be at a disadvantage if he attempted this new shadow in his proper person.

He was known to at least three of Jeffrey's old associates. The result was that Bob went to a facial artist, as has been seen, and now as he sat in the restaurant planning for his night's work, a glance at a mirror made him entirely satisfied with his recent investment.

One hour later Bob was in front of the house where Richard Jeffrey had made his home.

It was closed up tight—a respectable dreariness showed in the mourning-draped door, drawn blinds and decent solitude of the place.

Bob soon learned that after viewing the remains that afternoon friends had departed, leaving a solitary watcher, who claimed to be the only relative of Jeffrey in the city—a sort of cousin.

Bob, lurking about the place, made out this person in a rear room, seated at a table well supplied with liquors and cigars.

For nearly an hour Bob hung about the house, taking frequent glances through the side street window at the single watcher, guessing that he was wasting his time lingering here, yet somehow held to the spot by an attraction he could neither analyze nor resist.

"Something's working!" muttered Bob. "I can tell it by my feelings. What, I wonder—what's in the air that makes me feel as if I was waiting for something to break loose? Is that it?"

A neat black wagon had driven into the rear yard of the place.

Two men got out. One carried a bag in which tools jangled.

Bob pressed close to the gate through which the vehicle had just passed, and a second later knew that the men were undertaker's assistants.

"Funny movements this Jeffrey crowd are making," he heard one of them remark.

"How so?"

"Stealing off and shipping the body at midnight, instead of in the morning, as announced," came the reply.

"That's so—do seem in a hurry, for a fact," admitted the other.

"The boss says he never ran such a funeral. They insisted on putting the body in the casket themselves, screwed down a double lid, and friends had to view the dear departed through two thicknesses of glass."

"Well, the bill's paid without a grumble, so where's the difference? Orders to come to the rear door, box the casket and get it shipped. There's a light. Come, let's get through with our job."

One of the men knocked at the rear door. The man inside came to it and admitted them.

Bob noticed all hands take several drinks at the table. Then all three came out and crossed the yard.

"The box is in the carriage house, eh?" one of the undertaker's assistant's was saying.

"Yes," responded the watcher.

As the trio disappeared into the building in question, Bob acted on a sudden impulse.

The overheard conversation of the two new arrivals had set him thinking—a moment of vivid thinking drove him to instant action.

He glided through the open rear door of the house, ran through the lighted room and into the next one.

On trestles stood a casket. Into it Bob peered.

"It's Jeffrey," he murmured, gazing down through the uncovered lid of the casket. "It isn't!"

Like a mighty torrent of emphatic conviction, a sudden, violent contradiction followed the first subdued statement.

Nick Carter was a man of wonderful powers of perception.

This faculty he had transmitted to Bob, or rather cultivated and advanced it in him, for the qualification was latent in his pupil when he first encouraged Bob to join his detective school.

Bob treasured all Nick's teachings, and never failed to give them a practical demonstration whenever opportunity presented.

It was the most natural thing in the world, therefore, that in the few flashing glimpses he had obtained of Richard Jeffrey, he had not only fixed every feature on his mind, but had sought out distinguishing marks of personality.

In the room in the sky-scraper Jeffrey had abandoned his false beard.

Upon one cheek Bob had noticed a birthmark—not plain, but peculiar—a conical shaped blotch about the tint of a banana.

He had noticed also at the tip of one ear a little dint made by the clip of a stone in boyhood, or the careless snip of a barber's scissors.

These marks were present in Richard Jeffrey when last seen in life by Bob.

They were not present in the man lying in the casket.

What to unobserving friends was not patent, to Bob Ferret, detective, was the page of an open book.

The man in the casket was not Richard Jeffrey.

CHAPTER VII.

A CLOSE TRAIL.

In a twinkling Bob was out in the adjoining apartment again.

Upon its tale lay the undertaker's tool bag.

Bob snapped it open. Out came its patent screw driver, and he was back at the casket in thirty seconds.

"I'm going to find out!" fell determinedly from Bob's lips.

Whatever he guessed, Bob wasted no time in comment or speculation.

He worked—the moments were vital, the three men might re-enter the house at any instant.

The last screw came out. Bob carefully lifted the top cover of the casket.

He peered close at the waxy-white face cushioned beneath.

Across it he drew a finger, into it he pressed a finger; under head, chin and regulation kerchief and collar he probed a finger.

"I said the case was ended!" spoke Bob Ferret, grimly. "I was mistaken. It has just begun!"

Bob had made a marvelous discovery.

The body in the casket was no body at all.

It was a dummy.

The face that looked up at him was not human.

In fact, it was the famous mysterious rubber head.

Bob knew everything now—knew it so surely, that he was not unnerved by even surprise.

Back into place went the screws, back to the tool bag went the screw driver, out through the open door sped Bob, and just evading the three men bringing in the shipping box, he glided out into the street.

Within the space of three minutes Bob had made the discovery of his life.

"Up against a scheme that reads like a romance!" he soliloquized. "It's great!"

Like a person given the clue to a labyrinth, Bob could now penetrate the most secret motives of Jeffrey's peculiar manoeuvres.

The man had aimed to accomplish a fact—to figure as the murdered victim of Walter Foster.

This would enable him to slip out of public view, take Miss Clara Dean with him, and leave a hated rival to face a charge that would prevent him from tracing the girl or the plot, possibly bringing Foster to the gallows.

A wonderful rubber mask that, manipulated with cosmetics, had under the double glass of the casket, deceived even friends; had so copied the face of Richard Jeffrey that but for Bob's shrewdness his death would never have been questioned.

The Lake Geneva section of the plot, the murder inquest and all that, had been planned out before hand so that not a detail missed connection.

Bob theorized that Jeffrey's colleagues had constituted the jury, using a purchased dead body temporarily. The

dummy body had been put in the casket—everything timed to a second, had gone off like a well-mounted play.

But if Bob was amazed at all this, he did not lose sight of a sure fact—the end was not yet!

He felt positive that Jeffrey had some other motive for disappearing not yet developed. He saw that prompt, clever action only could prevent villain and girl from getting away beyond the reach of arrest and rescue.

Then the "Sealed Orders"—Nick Carter's mystic missive—to be opened only when Jeffrey sought to leave the country.

They told something. What? Bob's fingers tingled to investigate that little inclosure lying next to his heart, but, no—the time was not yet.

Bob was highly satisfied with himself. He took up a post of observation opposite the Jeffrey house, and awaited further developments.

They came promptly. The light went out. All three men appeared, bearing the casket, now inclosed in a planed pine box—all three drove off together.

Bob saw his point—to follow them, with the idea of narrowing down the shadow to the watcher, finally, the alleged cousin of Richard Jeffrey.

About to start up, he halted. Just as the wagon whirled around the corner, Bob made out a new figure on the scene.

A man crossed the road, stood a minute or two in front of the Jeffrey house, and then entered the grounds.

He tried the rear door cautiously. Then he knocked gently.

He went to a window and tapped on it. Of course there was no response, for there was now no one left in the house.

The man came to the front again finally, having gone clear round the house.

"What's he up to?" Bob questioned himself curiously.

Then as he saw the newcomer take a letter from his pocket and finger and glance at it in a meditative way, Bob's eyes snapped with interest.

"He's got a letter," decided Bob, "for some one he expected to find in the house. Who? The watcher, of course. Who from? Probably Richard Jeffrey.

He's a persistent fellow—he's making his rounds again."

Front door, side window, library entrance—tapping, prying, the latest arrival seemed bent on arousing some one in the house.

"I'm going to get that letter!" muttered Bob.

He managed to get down the street unobserved, and past the lurker's range of vision.

A short cut brought Bob to the rear yard of the place.

The carriage house door stood open. Bob entered, closing it after him. Some one had lived there at some recent time, for he ascended stairs to enter a sleeping apartment.

At its window Bob posted himself—he opened it, drew back in the shadow, and just as the man rounded the kitchen corner of the house indulged in an audible, prolonged:

"Ah—h!"

"Hello!" startled the man, turning quick and facing the source of the noise.

He made out the open window of the carriage house. This seeming to give him the idea that the person he sought might be there instead of in the house proper, he rapidly crossed the yard.

Up came a handful of gravel. Then the man whistled, low, but peculiarly. Then he called out:

"I say! Is any one up there?"

Bob came to the window. He had ruffled up his hair, and swayed into sight like a person half-asleep.

"Who's there?" he demanded, dreamily.

"Say! that you?" called up the man below.

"That who?" inquired Bob, acting as if he did not care much whether he found out or not, and deftly feeling his way.

"Why—I was—that is—I don't know—but I've got a message."

"Who from?" asked Bob, pressing his point.

"From—ahem! Come down here and I'll tell you."

Bob decided he might venture a bold fling.

Judging from the man's conversation, the latter did not know, except by direction, the person he had come to see.

That person, undoubtedly the watcher, the alleged cousin of Richard Jeffrey, might return speedily. Bob took squarely by the horns a vague dilemma, descended the stairs and confronted the late visitor.

The latter looked him over in some surprise, but he said nothing. He did not expect to meet a boy, that was apparent.

"Now, look here," called Bob, in a snappy tone, "what are you disturbing a fellow at this time of the night for?"

"I was sent."

"By Jeffrey," guessed Bob.

"Well, don't shout it to the world!" ejaculated his companion, with a nervous stare around. "You are the watcher—Jeffrey's cousin?"

"Just came out of the house."

"I expected to find you in the house."

"Afraid of ghosts—even rubber ones!" remarked Bob.

This put him on an excellent confidential footing with the newcomer.

"I see," nodded the latter. "Well, I've got a letter for you."

"Give it here."

Bob took a tendered missive. He tore open the envelope. By the light of a near street lamp he made out a few hasty lines.

"It says to hurry things and come up north right away," repeated Bob.

"That's it. Drop everything here, for everything's all right. I'm to say you'll come?"

Bob was in a quandary. He had yet to find out where "up north" was. Instantly, through accident, however, the man who had blindly accepted him as the rightful owner of the note gave him his cue.

"As soon as the body's shipped you must start," he remarked.

"Why, the body's shipped," spoke Bob, quickly.

"That so?"

"An hour ago."

"Then what's to keep you here?"

"Nothing."

"And what's the matter with our going back together?"

"None in the world."

"Come ahead."

Bob chuckled secretly. He felt himself

in rare luck—the messenger had come direct from Richard Jeffrey, he was about to lead Bob direct back to Richard Jeffrey!

His companion started briskly down the street, and then as they came in sight of a distant depot tower, glanced at its illuminated clock face and broke into a run.

"Six minutes," he remarked.

"To catch the train," ventured Bob.

"Yes."

Bob regretted all this urgency, but he had to accept it.

He would have liked to have had time to drop a line to Nick Carter—to prepare for what greeted him at Richard Jeffrey's new hiding place.

When they boarded the train Bob observed that his companion paid the fare to Waukegan.

"Forty miles from the city," soliloquized Bob. "What's he saying? stop at the crossing this side? Well, I'm running right into the covey. Wonder what it will result in?"

Bob had an hour or more in which to think out his plans for immediate future procedure.

The conductor finally came through the car and touched his companion, who was silent and drowsy, on the shoulder.

"We slow up at the crossing in two minutes," he said.

"All right!"

"Be ready to get off quick—no regulation stop, you know."

Bob's companion went out to the platform. He got to the step on one side of the car, and Bob on the other.

As the train slowed up, while the man's back was to him and he was absorbed in getting ready to alight safely, Bob dropped off the step into a sandy gutter running along the side of the track, crept to same woods, and stationed himself there on the watch.

His late companion, alighting a hundred feet beyond, stood staring vaguely around after the disappearing train.

Then he looked all about him, seemed to make up his mind that Bob had failed to alight, and calculating presumably that Bob would get off at Waukegan and walk back, started over the sand bluffs eastward.

Bob started after him. He had done a really clever thing.

He had probably got the man to lead him within a very short distance of Jeffrey's hiding place, and without in the least exciting his suspicions had given him the slip, and was now shadowing him down to close quarters.

The man stalked ahead, and Bob kept him in good range.

He came out finally past the edge of the sand bluff, descended beyond its fringe of trees and shrubs, and made direct for a lake, the clear waters of which gleamed some three hundred yards away.

The expanse was so level, so unbroken, without a spear of grass, a rock, to mark its even continuity, that Bob was compelled to call a sharp halt on himself.

"Say! suppose he's making for the beach? And a boat!" ejaculated Bob suddenly. "No, I see his destination. Good! Mr. Richard Jeffrey, I'm close to you once more!"

Running from the beach was a small fishing pier. At its shore end was a boat house.

It was flat and small, yet somewhat pretentious, as if it had been used at some time or other as the club house of an amateur rowing organization.

Bob saw a light in this, and he saw the man approach it, enter and disappear.

For a few minutes Bob speculated. Then his impulsive and adventurous spirit drove him into action.

He crossed the stretch of sand on a line with the side of the boat house that had no doors or windows.

Nearing the place, Bob found that he was in a position that would require considerable dodging, possibly a square run back to cover if anybody come out of the house, and the latter was inaccessible.

Bob decided he would work around to the front of the house, and try to peer in at the inmates and hear what they were saying.

Started to carry this plan into execution, Bob halted.

A door had opened at the other side of the house, and a voice drifted out on the still air:

"I'm tired of being cooped up. We'll stroll about till the signals come."

Bob braced for a run. It would be folly to remain where he was—discovery must eventually come.

He was about to make for the bluff, when a new idea occurred to him.

The ridges and hummocks of sand formed by the waves when they ran high suggested it.

Bob got down on hands and knees just where a weave of sand roped like a plow furrow.

He scooped into and under it—he crowded close into quite a cozy nest.

At that moment, nearer than before, he heard that same voice—the voice of Richard Jeffrey, Bob recognized it instantly.

At that moment, too, the thin crest of the sand furrow toppled, incaving him wholly.

Bob was not sorry. He was now safely planted. Only the tip of his nose stuck out of his sandy hiding place.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TWELVE TIN CASES.

Bub did not fancy a diet of sand. His eyes, ears and mouth were full of it, but as long as he could breathe in fresh air he did not mind discomfort.

Nearer came the voices of the two men strolling. Bob heard Jeffrey speaking once more:

"Everything is ready. Why don't we get the signals?"

"They'll come, never fear," answered his companion.

"Yes, but when?"

"Long before morning. You've got to wait for your cousin, you know——"

"I shall wait for nobody!" snapped out Jeffrey. "Do you understand how the merest breath of suspicion, the most accidental discovery might set fire to a train of disclosures that would knock awry all my cherished plans?"

"But they aren't going to come," confidently asserted the other. "What's been done so far hasn't seen a break. The men who helped you did their set part, were paid for it, ask no questions and forget the rest. The body's on its way to Dubuque. Your rival bids fair to be hanged."

"And the girl—she is on the boat?"

"Been there for two days."

Bob heard Jeffrey chuckle gleefully.

"It is a royal layout," he cried; "sure enough! Ha! ha! Nick Carter's kid detective got a slight inkling of the game, but—we quieted him."

"It's a square run now," spoke Jeffrey's companion. "Once aboard the ship, you've got a clear course. Is the— the stuff ready?"

"Not so loud! I'm on pins and needles to reach safety, with that."

The voices faded away. Bob ventured to lift his eyes far enough to clear them of grit and glance around.

The two speakers had strolled out of earshot upon the pier.

Bob felt mentally stimulated, as if he had taken a vigorous appetizer.

"I'm striking bedrock at last!" he murmured. The 'stuff!' I knew there was another string to Jeffrey's bow. The feigned murder, the man in jail, the girl in captivity—these are only one end of the case. The others—that's the start of it!"

Bob lifted his head clear up now, for he was excited.

Lakeward, from the mist and gloom, shot up a rocket. It had the peculiarity of being bright yellow, train exploding sparks and all.

Bob saw the form of Jeffrey's companion rush down the pier planking.

He disappeared within the house, and came out with a long object that Bob immediately recognized.

"A return rocket," murmured Bob. "This is getting interesting!"

There was a flare, a hiss and an explosion way aloft, a minute later.

"This is the real disappearance of Mr. Richard Jeffrey," soliloquized Bob. "What am I to do, where is he bound for, what is the stuff, and—that must be it!"

Bob had lost considerable of his caution. He felt that a climax was about to occur. He had got out of the sandy trough, and, lining the house, crouched where it joined onto the timbers of the pier.

From the house both Jeffrey and his companion were now carrying something.

They made six trips, each with a tin

box about two feet wide, three feet long, and six inches thick.

These seemed to be quite heavy, and they stacked them up at the far end of the pier.

The last trip from the house the light had been extinguished. Jeffrey had also put on an overcoat with a huge enveloping collar.

As he now restlessly paced the pier, looking constantly and anxiously across the water, Bob realized that all his interest was centred there.

"It's plain to read the oracle," commented the latter emphatically. "A ship has signaled—undoubtedly the one with the girl, the one that dumped me overboard three nights ago. Jeffrey is going ahead with those tin boxes. Those tin boxes are 'the stuff.' In a little while a yawl will probably come ashore for them and Jeffrey. Then, where will I be?"

Bob pondered the problem seriously. He formulated a dozen plans, abandoned them because the element of risk was ever present in a way that meant not only failure in scoring a point, but his own discovery as well, and was starting out a new train of thought when he saw lights out in the lake.

"That's a ship's lantern. It's come to anchor," he soliloquized. "A moving lantern. That's on a smaller boat. Look here! once that ship sails, where am I?"

Bob estimated the distance of the ship from shore—half a mile. He formed a resolution.

He took off his coat, vest and shoes, and made a bundle of them.

Tying them across his shoulders, he stole back to the bluff, keeping the house between himself and the two men at the end of the pier.

Lining the bluff a little distance he again descended to the beach, waded in the water to his neck, fixed his eye on what he took for the distant ship's lantern, and struck out sturdily.

Any one but an expert swimmer might have shrank from the task, for the water was cold, the light farther away by a great deal than half a mile.

Bob, however, was at home in the water. He reached the vicinity of the ship, breathing somewhat rapidly, but by no means exhausted.

Directly over the water hung a vapory mist. It enabled him to make out only the outlines of a large vessel, but it as well screened him from observation, as, coming around to its far side, he discovered a dangling rope, held to it. And bent his ear to catch some sound from the deck that might guide his further movements.

Strain his ears as he would, however, Bob could only make out gruff voices—he could not distinguish what was being said.

He crept up the rope and lifted his eye above the side rail.

The deck of a little trim-built steamer showed. Over at its side, eyes fixed shoreward, were half a dozen men.

Bob surmised that their interest was centred on the ship's yawl and its return load.

He scanned the deck for some place of concealment. Then he made out an open hatchway.

It was the easiest thing in the world for Bob to reach this unperceived and drop below.

Once below, however, Bob found some difficulty in guessing his exact environment.

It was black as pitch. He ran against one after another of what felt like great copper caldrons, and sounded like them when he rapped them with his knuckles.

However, Bob got pretty well toward the stern of the hold, a safe distance from the hatchway, for he felt that this had been left open for some definite purpose.

In this he found himself to be right. He could trace out from sounds and movements after a spell that the yawl had returned to the ship; and at last there was the jar of dragging chains, and from the rocking motion Bob knew that the vessel had started up.

Bob shrank back as a light flared suddenly into the hold.

A man came down the notched centre post with a lantern, which he attached to a hook pendant from the under side of the deck flooring.

Bob took a sharp, eager look all around him.

The vessel had a queer cargo; its hold contained about twenty copper tanks,

made like jars, bulging at the middle and narrowing at the top.

A second man came down and moved with the first one along the row of tanks.

"Which one is it, mate?" he asked.

"Think it's the fifth or sixth one. Soon find out," responded the other.

He tapped several of the metal receptacles. All sounded dull until he reached one where a clear, hollow, vibrating tang followed the tap of his hard fist.

"Here we are," he reported.

"Rest filled with oil, are they?"

"All but this. Left empty purposely. Now then, tell the captain we're ready."

"Wonder what they're ready for?" muttered Bob.

The layout reminded him of the jars of oil in the "Forty Thieves"—there was an air of the unusual, of mystery about the ensemble that made him creep as close up toward the hatchway as he dared.

From the rounding side of a tank Bob peered keenly.

Down came the second sailor from the deck again, lowering first a short ladder.

To the empty kettle he proceeded, and tilted the ladder up its side.

"Now, you get up there," he directed to his companion.

"Up it is!" retorted the other, suiting the action to the word.

"All ready!" sang up his companion.

Down from the deck came a pair of hands, holding something quite familiar to Bob.

"One of the tin boxes Jeffrey and his friend brought out on the pier from the boat house," murmured the intensely engrossed Bob.

"One!" sang out the man who was lowering from the deck.

"One it is!" answered the sailor who received it.

"One, and she's loaded!" in a sing-song voice tallied off the man on the ladder, receiving the box and tipping it over the open top of the upper receptacle.

Bob heard it slide down and land.

"Two!"

"Two" it was! And "two!" again! and "two!" at the copper tank, and this process was carried on until "twelve!" was trebly chanted.

The sailor descended the ladder. With

his companion he climbed the hatchway post and stepped on deck.

"Well!" ejaculated Bob, "good as a scene in a play. Now, what does it all mean?"

It meant "the stuff" safely stowed. Bob knew that much, if nothing more—but what did that "stuff" comprise?

The sailors had left the lantern behind them. Bob waited five, ten minutes.

"I don't believe they're coming back," he theorized. "Guess the next thing in order is for me to see what those tin boxes contain."

Bob glided over to the ladder, peered down into the cavernous depths of the great copper jar, reflected, decided, and dropped boldly.

He leaned on the flat heap of tin boxes. They had fallen one upon the other.

Bob weighted the top one.

"Heavy enough," he murmured.

He felt all over the outside surface. All the joints were securely soldered as if to make a perfectly air-tight and water-tight covering.

"This beats me!" muttered Bob. "Each box seems to contain some object nearly fitting, but it shifts a trifle. I believe it's my duty to tap one of those cases and see what's inside."

His knife drawn to begin operations, Bob checked himself, a trifle startled, very much dismayed.

Voices sounded coming down into the hold—not two, but four this time.

"You say you've got the boxes in the empty tank?" spoke the first.

"Ay, ay—snug and safe, captain."

"Will they stand immersion?" inquired the first speaker.

"Made for it, weren't they?"

"That's Jeffrey!" breathed Bob.

"Very well, boys, you need lose no more time, then. Pour in the oil and seal it up."

CHAPTER IX.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

Bob Ferret suddenly realized that he had taken the risk of his life in dropping into the copper tank. If those mysterious tin boxes lying at its bottom, and on which he now rested, had been a bait to lure him to his destruction, he could not have been more completely trapped.

"They are going to fill up this tank with oil!" gasped Bob.

They were, and promptly. The voices of Jeffrey and the captain died away. They had reascended to the deck.

Those of the two sailors continued in close marked evidence, however.

"It's a greasy job," spoke one, and Bob heard him come up the ladder and rest at its top.

"So, let's get through with it as quick as maybe, and wash down the taste of oil with the taste of something stronger," reported the other. "How will you have it, mate?"

"There's an iron bucket with a funnel mouth."

"I see it."

"And two barrels yonder, spigoted. You fill and lift to me. I'll pour in here."

Bob began to feel squeamish. They had "done Nick Carter in oil" in a noted Eastern museum, and Nick had been rather pleased at the attention. Bob wondered how the present original and highly different process would suit the veteran detective.

What to do was a serious problem. Rarely had Bob found himself in such an uncertain and exasperating predicament.

There seemed only one way out of it—to reveal himself, play the role of an independent roustabout, and trust to luck that his disguise would not be penetrated by the sailors who had seen him once in his proper person, or Jeffrey.

Bob decided on this, after discovering that it would be no easy task to get out of the tank, let alone getting to the floor of the hold.

That top rim was fully three feet above his head. He pressed back into the centre bulge of the great receptacle, discussing the pros and cons of doing what he had never done before—surrender.

"I'll wait till the last minute, oil or no oil!" he muttered, grimly. "Something may turn up yet to change the current of affairs."

Flop! came a bucket of oil. Bob was spattered—flop! came a second.

Bob reached down, and with some little difficulty tilted one of the tin boxes

so that its narrow edge came up the side of the tank.

Its other end was held steady by the massed boxes. He now was perched out of reach of what oil had been poured in.

When some twenty inches had been poured in, there came a welcome hail from without.

"I say, mate!" called the man below.

"Say it," returned the sailor on the ladder.

"We'll have to tap a new barrel."

"Other all run out?"

"Yes."

"Well—say, I reckon this is full enough."

"Think so?"

"Looks so," replied the other, peering down. "Those tin boxes are all covered up, far as I can see."

"That's all that's needed, eh?"

"Sure. Cargo of oil has the Dancing Fairy! As oil she passes any meddling revenue inspection hereabouts if we're overhauled, as oil she slips the customs up in Canada."

"Well, we'll leave the job this way for to-night, report to the captain in the morning, and if he says he wants the tank filled up, all right."

"Good enough! Hand me a cover."

"What cover?"

"To the tank top."

"Here you are!"

Bob got ready for a demonstration. Darkness completely enveloped him as the man aloft began not simply to place a cover, but to screw it on tight.

Then the dull light of the hold was apparent again, for the man had removed the cover he was adjusting.

"Won't do, mate," he announced.

"What won't?"

"This cover."

"Why not?"

"Particular, in this case. This special tank must be closed tight, seeing what it holds that is valuable."

"That's so."

"Screw thread on this cover is broken."

"There's some in the truck cabin."

"How do you know?"

"I saw them there. I'll go adeck and get one."

"I'll go with you, so you don't make half a dozen errands of it."

"Whew!" breathed Bob, ardently.

The utterance was a profound aspiration of intense relief.

The minute he heard the men clamber to the deck he reached up and closed his fingers on the rim of the top, his foothold on the slanted tin box enabling him to do so.

Bob dragged himself out upon the ladder, was down it in a jiffy, and behind a far tank back in the gloom of the hold long before the two sailors returned.

They brought a new metal cover with them. Bob noticed that its adjustment was done with a wrench, and took some time.

The sailor came down off the ladder, carried this to the hatchway, and slid it on deck, throwing the wrench after it.

"Well, mate, all through, eh?" piped his companion.

"The job's done, I guess."

"What's the run?"

"Canada."

"Ah!"

"Yes, we've contracted to get this package safe and sound across the border line. Ever hear of prize money?"

"In story books."

"The captain says we're in danger. We may be overhauled."

"Bah! These ain't pirate days."

"No, but they are revenue cutter days, and, whatever the job of those tin boxes, there's a slick scheme behind them. Anyway, 'watch out and keep very mum,' are the orders—pay doubled up twice over if we make the run safe."

"That's good enough for me. Here, going to leave the lantern?"

"Yes, just blow it out. We're always needing it down here."

The light was extinguished. The two sailors went up on deck.

The hatch cover came slamming down, and was battened into place.

Bob Ferret came out from covert and stood in the middle of the hold alive with varied thoughts and impulses.

The last words of the two sailors had given the final clue to Richard Jeffrey's intentions.

His destination was Canada—he was leaving the country.

"That's my clue!" spoke Bob.

Nick Carter's "Sealed Orders" bore on the outside the direction, "To be opened only if Richard Jeffrey attempts to leave the United States."

Bob's course was plain. The moment had arrived when that packet must be inspected.

Bob groped about for the lantern, carried it way back to the stern of the hold behind a shielding tank, and, taking his waterproof match-box from his pocket, flared a lucifer and lit the lantern.

Then he drew from a far inside pocket a little parcel covered with an oilskin protector in the shape of a pouch doubling over and over.

Bob removed the important missive he and received in the Palmer House three nights previous.

Eagerly, with curious, expectant eyes, he tore open the end of the envelope and took out the inclosure.

Then, holding the unfolded sheet close to the light, Bob Ferret read Nick Carter's "Sealed Orders."

CHAPTER X.

"SEALED ORDERS."

Bob Ferret felt that he had reached an eventful moment in his detective career.

Nick Carter never did anything for sensational effect, and Bob expected to read some pretty stimulating intelligence when he opened those "Sealed Orders."

But his glance fell, his lips twitched with uncertainty, and he looked the disappointed boy complete as he read the brief enigmatical message Nick's letter contained.

It read:

"If Richard Jeffrey attempts to leave the country, it will be by some lake craft.

"Learning the name of the same, disable the vessel if you can, and immediately repair to the nearest telegraph office.

"From there send to Bureau Secret Service, Washington, D. C., the following message: 'Rito Q. verilto K. mili, R. J.,' adding the name of the craft.

"Nick Carter."

Bob sat staring at the queer letter like a person expecting a reward and getting a slap.

Bob focused his ideas down to a clear, prompt bearing on the mission on hand. Richard Jeffrey was certainly leaving the country. The name of the craft? Bob knew it—the Dancing Fairy.

Disable it—how?

Telegraph—that was easy if he could get ashore. To the Bureau Secret Service, Washington—Bob, a little awed, felt that he was getting close to pretty high authority.

He took up the lantern with the bearing of a soldier, showing that he was of the right sort—willing to sacrifice personal theories and preferences, and obey a mandate when it came from headquarters.

Poking about the hold, investigating every nook and corner, thinking with all his might all of the time, Bob found finally what he was looking for—a way to disable the ship.

A large auger lay near some empty barrels. Bob took it up and examined its end, his lips set grimly.

"It's pretty serious business," he murmured. "I can't see the exact light on all this, but—it's in the programme, and here goes!"

Bob set to work at his task. He could only guess the result of what he was about to do, as, four holes, bored in different parts of the hull just below the waterline, little spurts and jets came driving in.

"She'll be waterlogged in about two hours," murmured Bob—"not enough to sink, but it will delay the craft, it may make the captain put into port, and that is evidently what I am called on to do."

Bob had acted according to his lights. He took up the next section of his instructions: To get ashore.

He climbed up the notched hatchway post.

"No go," he instantly reported, pushing unavailingly at the battened-down cover.

He proceeded to the stern. There were two little windows here overhead.

Bob found that they were held stationary by an inside casing strip. With his pocket knife he pried off the top one, and had the sash out promptly.

"I can make it, I can get up aloft there easily," he soliloquized, poking out

his head and planning how a catch at an ornamental knob, a pull along the sloping ridge to the name corner would enable him to reach the stern rail.

Bob faltered, however, for a moment. He was very certain that the contents of that central oil tank, the twelve tin boxes, cut an important, perhaps the all-important figure in the case on hand.

Bob crawled out of the window. The deck was almost deserted. At the bow he made out one sleepy figure and an active one.

Bob aimed to get over to the side of the cabin where complete shadow and darkness prevailed.

He crouched there beside a coil of rope, and tried to make out the distance to land.

"We're skirting the shore a mile out, more," he breathed, calculatingly. "The yawl is hauled up. I'm afraid it's swim. What's that?"

Bob cowered lower—a faint sigh was wafted to his acute hearing. It was repeated. Straining his eyes, beyond a cabin window Bob made out a white face.

"It's a woman," he murmured—"the girl! It must be. Miss Clara Dean, is it you?"

Chivalrous Bob never yet had passed by a female in distress. He made no exception to the rule, even with Nick Carter and the Government Secret Service to account to for every moment of his time.

"What is it?"

Bob pressed close up to the window.

"Answer my question," he said, quickly—"you are Miss Clara Dean?"

"Yes! yes!" fluttered a frightened voice.

"You are held here a prisoner by Richard Jeffrey?"

"I am held as a hostage," wailed the poor girl. "Unless I go with him, he leaves my—a friend to die."

"Mr. Foster? Listen, Miss Dean, and act quickly," pursued Bob, nerved to lift fifty boats into the water if need be, to fight his way through serried ranks to rescue this poor girl from her cruel captor. "Come out on deck."

"I do not know the way, and—oh! I dare not! I dare not! I am in Richard Jeffrey's power."

Bob sped from the spot. He located the cabin door. He pushed it gently in, he entered a large dark apartment.

"Her stateroom must be here," he murmured, feeling a knob, and softly pushing open a door. "Miss Dean! trust me, and come to the deck. Richard Jeffrey has no real power over you. Take my hand."

It was taken.

"Come. This way. Gently. Ah! we are on the deck. Wait till I see if I can lower the ship's yawl——"

"Who are you?"

Bob was fairly swept off his feet with astonishment.

The hand that until now had rested so placidly in his own suddenly assumed the rigidity of steel.

It clutched his wrist as in a vise, a second hand shot at his throat—the hands of Mr. Richard Jeffrey.

Bob had made a fatal mistake—he had entered the wrong stateroom.

It was all up with him now—he saw that. There was one desperate means of escape, one only.

"Who, are you? Do you hear me—zounds! it cannot be——"

Some vivid suspicion as to Bob's identity must have entered Jeffrey's mind, for he started as if he was confronted by a wraith.

The two men at the bow, witnessing the struggle going on, were running forward.

Unnerved momentarily, Jeffrey half released his grasp on Bob, and the latter tore wholly free with a forceful effort.

To the rail he sprang, and over he went unhesitatingly.

Richard Jeffrey ran at him, after him. A great block lay on the deck, the only missile in reach.

Grasping it, Jeffrey leaned over the rail of the craft, saw a white face that the great block dashed out, heard a thudding splash.

Then as the block drifted astern alone, he counted the seconds to see Bob's head come up once more.

"Settled!" he muttered, with a quavering growl, "who knows? A boy with nine lives, and his presence here means—danger!"

CHAPTER XI.

"JOINING THE BAND."

"Where's the telegraph operator?"

"Not due for two hours yet."

"I must see him."

Bob Ferret looked like a half-drowned rat, but he talked like a general.

He had followed out section one of Nick Carter's "Sealed Orders" to a T—disabled the craft that was bearing Richard Jeffrey and his secret away into exile.

When he had sprang overboard, the very missile, the wooden block which Jeffrey had hurled so murderously after him, had helped Bob to get to the distant shore.

And now after a run over sand bluffs, through forests, along railroad tracks, just as dawn was streaking the far eastern horizon, Bob had reached a railroad station.

The village watchman came upon him pounding at the locked door, peering in at the closed windows, and learning what he was after told him that he would have to wait.

But Bob was not of the waiting kind. The "Sealed Orders" had directed an immediate message.

Bob asked just one question of the watchman—where did the telegraph operator live?

Then he made one dive for the house indicated, and kept up a racket at its door till there was a response.

Very grumblingly the operator listened to the simple statement that a "rush" message must go at once over the wires, half dressed himself, and sulkily led the way back to the depot.

He let himself and Bob in, and got a clear wire to Chicago.

"Fire away!" he directed—"what you got?"

"Bureau Secret Service, Washington, D. C.," began Bob.

"Got it," he nodded.

Bob drew the oilskin pouch from his pocket and took out Nick Carter's letter.

"'Rito Q. verilto K. mili R. J.—the Dancing Fairy.'"

"Eh!"

The operator's fingers came down with a sharp click.

Bob wrote the message out in pencil, and handed the enigmatical cipher words to him.

"What you giving me?" muttered the operator.

"Straight goods. That's the department formula. They understand it."

Clicketty-click.

Bob heaved a ponderous sigh of relief.

He had executed the final section of Nick Carter's "Sealed Orders," and somehow, no matter how things turned out so far as his future efforts were concerned, Bob felt that a saving clause was registered at Washington, and the United States Government probably knew what they were about.

For future efforts were already in his mind—Bob was indomitable.

"I'm going to get back on the track of the Dancing Fairy straight," he told himself.

"I wouldn't abandon that poor girl, Miss Clara Dean, in her helplessness and terror under any circumstances.

"The twelve tin cases in the copper tank are a regular consignment to me.

"Breakfast and a clean-up, and I'll soon find out if the scuttled Dancing Fairy is anywhere along the coast."

Bob probed down again into the secret receptacle for his treasures from which he had just taken the letter.

"Pshaw!" he uttered in chagrin and dismay.

He went through his pockets with no results. Bob was looking for his reserve fund, the little roll of banknotes he always carried in a secret pocket for contingencies.

"I must have dropped the money in the hold of the ship," he declared. "Collect," he spoke to the operator.

"Why, you see—I don't know you and——"

"It's all right. I guess the government is good for it," spoke Bob. "I'd pay, but I've lost my money."

The operator looked slightly discomposed. It was bad being roused out of bed early, and to have added the risk of having to pay for an unauthorized or hoax message out of his own pocket made him grumble to himself.

"Here, I'll fix it!" cried Bob, suddenly. "I've got to have money to hire a boat,

for other expenses—one minute, operator—I have another message to send.”

The operator looked glum and suspicious.

“Maybe this is to the Bank of England!” he half sneered.

“Don’t be woozy, now!” chirped Bob. “You’re in the line of duty, if you only knew it. I’m going to telegraph for money, and it will be here in an hour.”

“Who to?”

“Nick Carter, Palmer House, Chicago.”

The operator shut the key of his instrument as if that settled all further business in the telegraph line.

“I won’t stand it!” he announced.

“Stand what?” demanded Bob, in surprise.

“You’re either crazy or thinking you’re having some fun with me.”

“See here——”

“No, you don’t! Secret service, maybe, but Nick Carter—that’s too heavy a dose!”

“You think——”

“I think nothing. You don’t know any such big people, not you. Get out of here! If you have the money, you can pay for fool messages all day long, but you can’t lark me on any more free rubbish.”

The operator bundled Bob out on the platform and proceeded home in high dudgeon, not allowing Bob to get another word in edgewise.

“I don’t suppose I exactly look like a Vanderbilt,” soliloquized Bob, glancing down at his disordered attire. “That second detective shot was too heavy for him, eh? Well, now what am I going to do?”

Bob sat down on the bench outside the station. He did not have a cent in his pocket—his watch had been stolen by the sailors during his first sojourn on the Dancing Fairy.

“Working without money in the present instance is like running a boat without oars,” he reflected. “If I was in some big city I’d be able to fix it, but I’ve hoodooed myself with this operator here, sure. There comes a train—going north. I’ll flip it to the next town and try my luck there.”

Bob did not do this, for the train did not stop. It slowed up, but he hesitated

about risking a catch at the vestibuled platforms.

“Jeffrey!”

Just as the last car went whirling by, Bob shot out that word as if it was a hot bullet in his mouth.

Down the tracks he put, ran twenty feet, saw that the speed-increasing train had gained forty, and came to a standstill, goggling, overcome.

“I saw him!” voiced Bob, gaspingly. “I saw Richard Jeffrey, a girl beside him! Delusion? No. Guesswork? Never! Say! this is simply—bewildering!”

Bewildered, but pulsating with the most vivid emotions, Bob retraced his steps to the depot.

He could reason out this new aspect of affairs in only one way; the Dancing Fairy had become waterlogged, had put into some cove or harbor, and Jeffrey, alarmed at the discovery that a representative of Nick Carter was again on his trail, had hastened with Miss Clara Dean to the nearest railway station and had taken the first train.

“Seem sort of uneasy?” fell upon Bob’s ears, and the village watchman confronted him, looking extremely curious.

Bob overwhelmed him with questions concerning the train that had just passed through.

“Special for the hunting grounds up beyond Lariboo,” explained the watchman. “It’s a special, and stops just once between, at Madison.”

In ten minutes Bob had blocked out what to him seemed an unassailably reasonable line of theory.

Defeated in his plan to get out of the country by lake, with the beautiful girl whom he held under a helpless spell of terror, Jeffrey had taken a train for Northern Wisconsin.

Arrived at the terminus beyond Lariboo, he would hire some conveyance to take them across the long stretch of pineries, tap Lake Superior, and get across the border by the safest and least guarded route.

Bob made diligent inquiries about the next train.

There would be one through in an hour—an excursion to Madison. A local deputation was going. Some of them

began to arrive as the man explained to Bob.

The latter had now one point in view only—Richard Jeffrey and his supposed destination.

"If I only had money!" murmured Bob.

He saw several groups of people arrive at the depot. Then came the straggling village band.

The biggest man among them was the bass drum artist. His immense noise-maker and himself took up a whole bench at the end of the depot.

The operator, who was also the ticket seller, appeared. Bob gave up all idea of making any appeal to him for assistance, as he was greeted with a suspicious scowl.

"No chance to telegraph for money—none to buy transportation with! Well, I've got to follow Richard Jeffrey. There's simply no way to evade it," declared Bob, emphatically.

Bob made up his mind to get on the excursion train when it came along, ticket or no ticket.

Trucks, roof, blind baggage, or bumper, he did not care much how he was carried, so that he made some large city soon, and Lariboo finally, for thither he was positive Richard Jeffrey had gone.

As Bob noticed the telegraph operator and the village watchman in close converse and glancing significantly at him while they talked, he guessed that they would keep a close eye on him when the train came through.

The man with the big bass drum was a solemn-looking fellow. He sat in solitary grandeur, with his immense-looking instrument by his side, but as Bob edged to a near seat he beckoned to him and pointed to an open paper parcel on the bench.

"Take one—you look hungry," he said. "I only need one to keep this damp morning air out of my lungs."

"Thank you," returned Bob, promptly seizing one of the sandwiches indicated.

The last three or four mouthfuls Bob nearly choked on account of the rapidity with which he bolted them.

A sudden idea had come into his mind.

He drew nearer to the sober-faced drummer.

"Mister," he said, "I want to go on this excursion train."

"Cheap rates, you know."

"If it was a cent the round trip, I couldn't make it, mister," pursued Bob, in that coaxing, confidential way of his that generally won. "I'll bet you've got a heart as big as that drum!"

The man looked pleased and pushed the other sandwich over toward Bob, but sandwiches were not what Bob was after at present.

"Look here!" continued Bob, still more earnestly, "I've got to get to Madison—it's almost a matter of life or death."

"That's—that's a pretty serious statement, lad."

"It's true, sir," insisted Bob. "Will you help me?"

"Me? eh! Why, how can I?"

"I'll tell you. Back at Chicago I can command plenty of money. Give me your address, and sure as I live I will send you liberal pay when I get back, if you will help me on my way now."

"I don't see how I can do it—I have only my ticket, and a little change."

"Mister," pronounced Bob, startingly, "your drum is big."

"Biggest in the country!" announced the man with a glow of pride.

"Put me in it. Take off the head, there's ample room, crowd me in, put on the head again, lug me aboard the train, and you'll never regret it!"

"Put you in my drum?" he stammered.

"Why not?"

"I—I—it could be done, of course, but I'm a member of the church choir. It would be cheating the railroad——"

"I'll send you the money to pay the railroad back; I'll send you a liberal fee for your kindness. Mister, look in my eyes—do I strike you as telling the truth?"

The drummer looked, as directed. Bob's soul of honesty captured him.

He glanced around. No one was in sight at that end of the depot. He slipped snares and braces, he pulled one great head of the drum out of place, revealing

a barrel-interior space big enough to stow a two-hundred-pounder in.

"I'll do it," said the bass drummer, simply, to Bob. "Get in!"

CHAPTER XII.

'TWIXT LIFE AND DEATH.

"That's the room!"

Bob Ferret stood in the chill, dim passageway of a typical country tavern.

He had arrived at Lariboo, overcoming extraordinary difficulties—carried in a drum to Madison, wedged into a closely packed freight car the rest of the way.

Lariboo was the outpost settlement beyond which the famous hunting grounds and pineries of Wisconsin extended.

Bob learned that the schemer had taken two rooms at the settlement tavern.

Now, at daylight, Bob had stolen up stairs, and peering through a keyhole and making out an overcoat that was familiar, knew that he had located Richard Jeffrey's room.

He proceeded to the next one. Bob only listened here, to low, sobbing sounds.

"The girl! It is Miss Clara Dean," he decided.

To capture the man, to prevail on the girl to defy his vaunted powers, to get both back to Chicago—there was Bob's task.

"Jeffrey is below," murmured Bob. "I saw him go down. I'll get a word with the girl. Oh, bother!"

Bob suddenly found himself in a fix. The passageway had no window at either end, the only break except locked doors being where the stairs descended to the lower floor.

What had startled Bob was the sound of Jeffrey's voice below, calling to the tavern keeper:

"Have the covered wagon here at nine o'clock."

Then, clump-clump, came footfalls.

"He's coming to his room," fluttered Bob. "I've got to face him. No!"

Bob made a dive for something that stood tilted near a door—one end of a high, narrow bedstead.

Quick as a flash he lifted it, kept it slanted so that it completely hid head,

face and his body to the waist, and started down the hall.

Bob ran squarely against Jeffrey, but the latter, taking him for some servant, squeezed aside, and Bob passed on undetected.

"A narrow shave!" soliloquized Bob, resting his burden at the other end of the hall. "He's coming out again."

Jeffreys reappeared, putting on his overcoat.

Bob had tilted the bedstead sideways against the wall and got behind it. Jeffrey never suspected that it shielded a lurker.

"Jeffrey is going out into the village. Now is my time, or never!" Bob declared, running to the door of the room he had last approached.

Tap-tap.

"Who is there?"

Bob pressed his lips to the jamb. He condensed into fifty words the vital urgency of a special dispatch.

The door was unlocked. Bob pressed over the threshold.

His heart was instantly wrung with pity for the pale-faced, heartbroken girl who confronted him.

That, perhaps, was the reason he so soon convinced her what a friend he sought to be to her.

"I dare not leave this man," she faltered. "He can condemn Walter Foster to the gallows."

"My dear young lady," demurred Bob, "do you not plainly see that in helping his flight by remaining with him, you are bringing about that very thing?"

"But Richard Jeffrey is supposed to be dead!"

"And we know he is alive, and the rubber head in the casket will verify our claims. This scoundrel has frightened you with a phantom. Trust to me—a ready, secret way is opened to liberty."

Beneath the window of the room ran a low shed.

Bob's fair charge was convinced now that he deserved her confidence and co-operation. Inside of two minutes they had reached the ground.

She took Bob's hand, and he hastened her over to where beyond some tracks the business portion of the settlement showed.

"What is your plan?" inquired the girl in an anxious tremor.

"To stow you safely with honest people."

"And he—that monster?"

"Leave Jeffrey to me!" responded Bob, grimly.

"Oh, mercy!"

Bob started at the sharp cry.

"What is it?"

"There he is, now!"

Bob looked back. A hundred feet to the rear, hurrying forward to overtake them, was Jeffrey.

The baleful morning light made his vicious face look more malevolent than over.

"Stop!" rang out from Jeffrey's lips.

"Run!" directed Bob.

A little ahead a freight train was backing down, but it came so fast that Bob running to cross over was blocked in his course.

"Stop, or I fire!"

The girl shuddered close to Bob. He looked back. Jeffrey was flourishing a revolver.

"Be brave!" whispered Bob to his terrified companion.

"Oh, he will shoot—he will kill us!"

"Will you do as I say?"

"I—I will try."

"It means your life, perhaps mine."

They had put a high pile of ties between themselves and their pursuer.

Now, straight for the long backing up freight train Bob ran.

"Miss Dean," he uttered, hurriedly, pausing directly at its side, "be ready to spring up and catch when I do."

"At the cars?"

"At the iron ladder, yes."

"Oh, I am afraid!"

"If we do not, and hasten to the top and over, we are lost. Now!"

Bob gripped at a passing car. The girl tried to follow his example. He secured a safe footing and fist-hold, and swept her up from the ground.

"Quick! Climb up! Hurry!" he breathed. "To the top, before we reach Jeffrey. Missed!"

Bob's heart sank like lead. With a fluttering breath the girl wilted, dangling in his grasp.

Bob could not climb up the iron lad-

der burdened with an insensible charge—he dared not risk a fall under the grinding wheels.

The train was backing up very fast now. It circled past the tie pile.

A sight beyond it made Bob's blood curdle.

Standing awaiting his coming, every second bringing him within closer, nearer range, was Richard Jeffrey.

His face was one glare of vicious ferocity, and he held a revolver leveled squarely at the young detective who had crossed his path for the last time, and whose life he was determined to now blot out.

CHAPTER XIII.

NICK CARTER'S HIDDEN HAND.

Bob Ferret faced death without flinching, but he felt that his hour had come.

If the freight train was not just then circling a mix-up of tracks he would have dropped the unconscious girl in his arms, would have leaped to the ground.

As it was, Bob could only hold on. Nearer moved the car up to the malignant-faced Jeffrey.

"Wiped out!"

Jeffrey hissed the words in ferocious anticipation of the close range bullet he would fire.

Thud!

Bob had expected a bang—Bob had expected to be the one to drop. Instead—it was Jeffrey!

And then, as the car passed Jeffrey, prostrate, crushed, an appalled thrill ran over Bob's frame, sturdy as it was.

What had happened was something that might not occur again under precisely the same circumstances in a hundred years.

As the car Bob clung to neared Jeffrey, the curve jolt sent its loose broad door swinging out.

The edge of this took Jeffrey squarely on the temple.

A stone mallet driven by a giant hand could not have delivered a more crushing blow.

When the train came to a stop, Bob got down, placed the insensible girl on the ground, and ran back to where Jeffrey lay.

He was dead, stone dead—his plotting

over at last—the power that always inevitably punishes the wrong-doer had intervened to save an imperiled maiden and a brave boy!

Bob did not go back to Chicago by freight, as at one time it seemed he would have to do.

He felt no hesitancy in using enough of the dead man's money to send a message to Nick Carter.

In the cipher code employed by Nick and his young pupils, Bob told the veteran detective the situation at Lariboo, directing the clerk at the Palmer House to get his message to Nick at once, at all hazards.

A laconic reply came back before noon.

"Wait. Will come on first train."

Bob rested that day like a warrior after a battle.

A summary finish had come to his end of the case—the main plotter was dead, Miss Clara Dean was free, and her lover, Walter Foster, would soon regain his liberty.

"As to the other end of the case," soliloquized Bob, "the Dancing Fairy, the twelve tin boxes, secret service, the sealed orders—I'll wait as patiently as I can to find out the merits of Nick Carter's hidden clue."

There was one, as Bob had latterly all along suspected.

Nick Carter had retired from personal service long since, the only branch of detective science he was interested in being the schooling of his bright young pupils.

But in the present case Nick had given some active advice, and while Bob was working one end of the affair, the detective had Jack Burton and Aleck White doing service on the other end.

This Bob learned upon Nick's arrival. In his usual terse way the veteran detective explained what to Bob had been heretofore a complete mystery.

"When Richard Jeffrey came to me and claimed to be afraid of assassination," narrated the detective, "I knew there was something under the surface.

"You promptly found out what, Bob—a scheme to hang a rival and marry a girl he coveted.

"After I sent you out on the trail of Jeffrey, I chanced to pick up a letter

that dropped from his pocket when he gave me his card.

"It opened my eyes wide. I had found a clue to a case that for three weeks had baffled the United States Secret Service."

"The tin boxes!" murmured Bob.

"Exactly. Know what they contain?"

"No."

"Twelve volumes of public records of a government land office in North Dakota."

"They had been stolen?"

"Nearly two months ago. Think what that meant! Confusion in titles to millions and millions of dollars' worth of property.

"The game was to get them to some other country, and at a distance negotiate with landowners to furnish transcripts for a large consideration."

"What a scheme!"

"The government took a hand. When I found that letter, I read that Jeffrey was a prime mover in the whole affair, that a vessel was waiting for him to get his private schemes ready to dovetail into a run for Canada with the books.

"Hence, my 'Sealed Orders,' and directions not to hamper you with that end of the affair. My clever young friend, twelve hours after the receipt of your telegram the Dancing Fairy was located waterlogged, the tin boxes were unearthed from their oily bath."

"Mr. Carter, what a great case!" murmured Bob.

"Yes, and Jack and Aleck, who have been watching various lake craft for three days, were in at the finish. You have done a big piece of work, Mr. Bob Ferret, and nobody appreciates it more than the United States Secret Service."

"It broke my heart to leave those mysterious tin boxes in the hold of the Dancing Fairy," declared Bob.

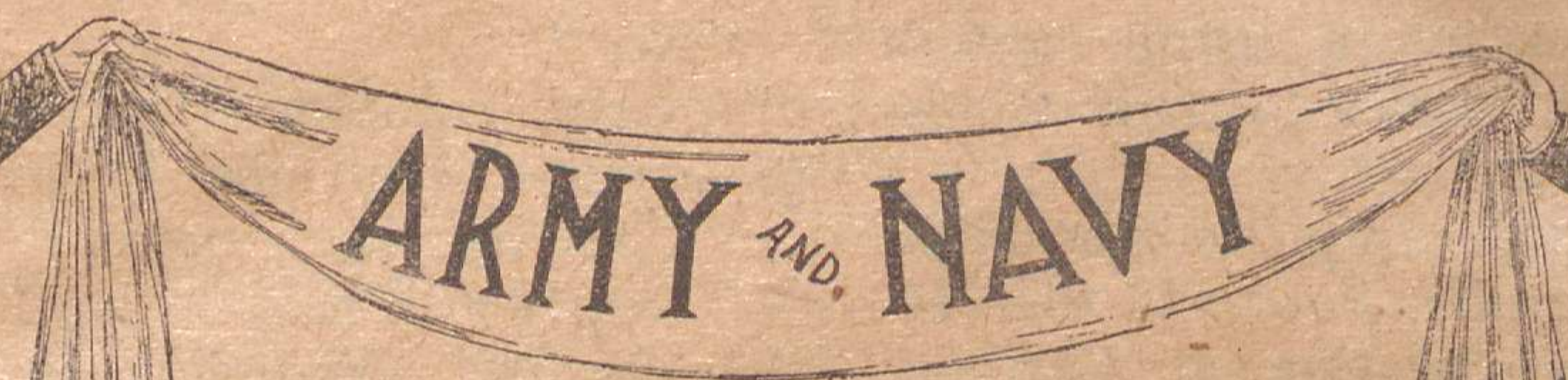
"You did just right," commended Nick Carter—"obeyed orders—hewed close to the line on the main clue in the case, that led straight up to all the others—The Mystery of The Black Sack."

[THE END.]

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